Response to Tanja Aho and Leland Tabares: Madness and Parainstitutionality

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ABSTRACT

Tanja Aho's response both criticizes a scholarly trend she identifies as "neoliberalcentrist analytics" for presuming neoliberalism's homogeny, hegemony, and totality and introduces a new critical analytic, "crip of color materialism," which Aho describes as "the convergence of a historical materialist critical disability studies/crip theory/mad studies with critical race theory and queer of color critique." This double move allows Aho to foreground the question of reason: In contrast to the bad tendencies of neoliberalcentric scholars to make neoliberalism's dissemination of economic reason into an all-purpose explainer for everything from state violence to affective experiences of selves, Aho asks us to consider the assigning of reason and unreason—that is, normalization and pathologization—as continuous political economic processes in the long durée of liberal racial capitalism. I am intrigued by thinking liberal rationality as ablism (so long as its racialized and gendered violences are foregrounded) and imagine Aho's interest in "intensity, instability, and irrationality" as modes of critical disruption will prove generative. But we will have to wait for future scholarship from Aho to get a thicker sense of what kinds of thinking a "crip of color materialist analytics" will generate.

I am grateful for Aho's gentle criticism of my claim that, in contrast to the moralism of liberal modes of institutionality, which justify inequality by sorting human groups according to their worthy/unworthiness, neoliberal modes of institutionality, "require just techne," a connection to "the human" through "mere numeracy, virtualization, and technification." Aho is right: moralism is not evacuated from deployments of financialization, whether we are talking about austerity regimes or the dismantling of Dodd-Frank. Rather, that misfire comes from trying to put my head around what I've since decided to call "administrative violence," the use of commensurability, abstraction, quantification, and other banal routines of nominally democratic governance to secure impunity for the violence that capital accumulation requires.

Leland Tabares productively complexifies our thinking of institutional environments, and the academy as an institution, by noting that institutions are never singular or determinate; rather, our perception of the academy as an institution is scalular and contextual: "Depending on how close or how far back we want to scale our perception of the academy as an institution, we can always arrive at institutionality from a different contextual frame (e.g., the old liberal humanist university, the corporate university, etc.)." Tabares's primary interest is at the level of "para-institutions . . . institutions that are peripheral to the academy yet which directly overlap with it." His chief examples are

corporate donors to universities (Apple), yet he also mentions families, religious youth groups, activist media outlets, and digital media subcultures, para-institutional contexts that students and others inhabit in addition to the university. He mishears my call to perform collectivity excessively and disruptively within the university (for example, throwing a monkey wrench into administrative discourses of "diversity" by insisting that the term include people who do not go to college) as an elitist call to institute radical collectives. (This is understandable, given the conventional readings of one of my source texts, *The Undercommons*.) Yet this criticism leads Leland to articulate a concern that interests me too: the question of how to unleash "the political potential of critique" outside of universities, so that critique can make a difference (what kind?) particularly in the academy's para-institutions.

Leland notes that he is interested in rethinking the bounds of institutions and bringing in their intersectional and scalular contexts "so that the capacity for radicalism developed in one institutional context can be made legible in another." For me, this brings to mind the way that the national media reduced the student movements' deep politicization of ongoing settler colonialism and the afterlives of slavery (which I refer to in the beginning of my Forum contribution) to "campus issues." To me, Leland's call to develop interpersonal collaborations across institutional contexts and to promote more thick and dialogical ways of academics interacting with non-academic community members (for him, exemplified in sociological methods committed to social justice work in Asian American studies) sounds like a good thing to do, but not because "it disrupts the bounds of the academy." (Roderick Ferguson's work might ask us to ask how it allows the academy to penetrate and re-order non-academic space even more.) Rather, I think the example of the new campus protests—which are not overly citational, but clearly flower from earlier social movement knowledges (which make legible the epistemic violences of white supremacist education, the coloniality of American universities, access as reparations, etc.)—emphasizes the fact that radical critique comes *into* college campuses on the wings of social movements, more often than it is born there. Can analyzing the complex contextual and scalular nature of institutions—like the academy—help us to be more specific about its modes of power, so we can see the vectors of its corporate power, as well as the ways it serves as an institutional base (however precarious) for minoritized communities, like the Asian American youth groups to which Leland refers? Yes! So I like attention to complexity, not to disrupt institutional bounds and "overcome" them, but to pay more attention to the contact zones that cross in and through and around these overlapping institutional contexts, so we can be wary of appropriation and attentive to new possibilities of relations that emerge within them.

I am grateful for the energies and the insights of these two scholars. Both of their work demonstrate that thinking about "institutionality" rather than just analyzing institutions is necessary for catching on to the complexity of contested and conflictual material social processes, as these predispose the continuation of dominant epistemic and material conditions and open to new makings.

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Jodi Melamed is Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies at Marquette University. Her current research aims to provide an anti-racist critique of contemporary capitalisms and an anti-capitalist critique of historically dominant U.S. anti-racisms. She is the author of *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), and her scholarship has appeared in

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